MIRACLE AT A WEDDING
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Psalm 36: 5-10
Isaiah 62: 1-5
John 2: 1-11

"On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding." John 2: 1-2 (NRSV)

Jesus first visits people not in their sorrow, but in their joy . . . What does this say to gloomy Christians? Mind you, I'm not suggesting that all, or even most, of the sourpusses in the world are to be found in the churches. But there are an awful lot who seem to forget that if only one tenth of what we Christians believe were true, we still ought to be ten times as excited as we are.

William Sloane Coffin
On Changing Water to Wine
Collected Sermons

On the Sundays leading up to Easter I will be presenting a series of sermons based on incidents in the life of Jesus as they are described in the Gospel according to John. The idea came from a book, *Encounters with Jesus, Studies in the Gospel of John,* by Frances Taylor Gench. She is a fine scholar, an accessible writer, and teaches New Testament at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond. You can purchase or order her book if you wish to follow along and go a little deeper.

First, a few introductory observations about the 4th Gospel, the Gospel of John: New Testament 101.

The first four books in the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, are called Gospels, literally "good news." Each of them tells the story of Jesus - who the writers all believe is the Son of God, the Christ, God's anointed one. Each gospel's intent is to tell the story and convince readers of the truth of its claim that Jesus is the Christ. John puts it up front - in his introduction to the story: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

The interesting thing is that the first three Gospels tell essentially the same story. Each has a slightly different emphasis but the story is essentially the same. They are called Synoptic Gospels. You can put them

beside one another in three columns and actually see how much they are similar and how little they differ.

When you try to compare the fourth Gospel, John, with the first three, you encounter trouble. In fact it's virtually impossible. John seems to have been written much later than the Synoptic Gospels. John presents events in Jesus' life in a different order or sequence. But most striking is a series of incidents that occur only in John. They are about fascinating and interesting people - a man who comes to Jesus at night, a woman sitting by a well, a woman who is about to be stoned, another woman who pours expensive perfume on his feet, two men who take his body down from the cross, a woman walking in the garden where he is buried at dawn on the first day of the week.

John calls the miracles in these stories "signs:" signs of Jesus' glory and power, signs that point beyond the events to something else - and leaves to the reader the task of deciding what it means - like the day Jesus changed water into wine.

The first thing American Christians ask about these stories is did they actually happen? And the only good answer to that question is that it is the wrong question. A better question is "what is the truth in these stories and what do they mean and what do they tell us about God and ourselves and our lives and our destiny?"

The story of Jesus begins, in the fourth Gospel, not with an account of his birth, but with a wedding. The characters in this story are the wedding guests, including Jesus' disciples; the servants; the steward - he's the Wedding Consultant, party planner and sommelier-in-charge of arrangements, most importantly, the all-important matter of the refreshments; Jesus' mother and Jesus himself.

Someone noted that while wedding customs differ from culture to culture, one thing they all have in common is a family reunion and a party. In first century Palestine the wedding begins when the groomsmen go to the bride's house and bring her to the bridegroom's home for the ceremony and party. There was no honeymoon, but the wedding party was quite an affair, went on for days. People must have dropped in for a while, left to attend to business, get some sleep, and then returned for more eating and drinking and singing and storytelling and celebrating: just like a modern wedding reception but more so. There are relatives who haven't seen each other since the last wedding: there are two extended families getting to know each other, some happily, some not so happily. Frederick Buechner's picture of the event includes the eccentric aunt and difficult uncle, the old ones resting in the caterer's folding chairs, the young ones scrambling underfoot, driving everyone crazy.

They are remarkable events, wedding receptions are, not to mention the fact that there are so many details to plan for, the wedding itself is a "disaster waiting to happen." Sometimes it does, not often, but sometimes the florist doesn't show, the groom forgets the license, the bride decides she really doesn't want to go through with this. Ministers sometimes regale one another with wedding stories, like the ceremony I was conducting in which one of the groomsmen, the groom's teenage son, threw up in the front of Blair Chapel, just before the vows. And, one of the great things about being the pastor of this church is you get to tell the ultimate wedding story about the movie, "My Best Friend's Wedding," the actual wedding scene was filmed here, in this sanctuary. It took several days from early morning to late night to film a few minutes in the movie. Julia Roberts was here, Carmen Diaz walked down the aisle, the pews were full of hundreds of local actors and actresses, playing the congregation, dressed for a wedding. Our choir was in it, in choir robes provided by Hollywood, sparkling with sequins. We asked if we could keep them but we had to give them back. But our choir is in the movie. I didn't make the cut, but I did get to meet Julia Roberts and the actor who was the clergyman who turned out to be a good Presbyterian in a Los Angeles church where I had preached the year before. They paid us for the use of the sanctuary, not nearly enough we learned later, and we decided that the whole affair was so disruptive we wouldn't do it again, but it does make a great story, and I did get to meet Julia Roberts.

At the wedding in Cana disaster strikes . . . a family's worst nightmare. The wine runs out before the party is over. You can imagine the embarrassment to the groom's family. Mary notices. Maybe it's because she is a potential mother of a groom someday, and is particularly sensitive to the public humiliation and embarrassment to a relative or neighbor, but Mary says to her son - "This is terrible. Do something."

He's curt. "Mother! It's none of my business. It's none of your business."

She knows her son. He'll come around. He'll do something. "Do what he tells you" she says to the servants who surely are the first to know about this disaster and worry about how they're going to handle the guests' irritation when they tell them, "Sorry - no more wine."

He considers options. There are six huge stone water containers at the door of the house. Guests customarily wash their hands in them as they arrive. "Fill them with water" he says. The servants do - fill them to the brim - 30 gallons each. "Take some to the Steward" he says. I can imagine the shock, maybe the sneers . . . "You have to be kidding. Who is this guy anyhow?" But they do it - take a ladleful of what they know is water - they

just put it there - to the Steward, who has a sip and approves. It's good wine. It's really good, a lot better in fact than what we were serving.

The party can continue. There is now available an enormous quantity of very good wine - 180 gallons. That's a lot of wine. It will be a great party. I had two aunts who were not only teetotalers, but talked a lot about the evil of drink. When I was old enough and heard this story in Sunday School, I asked them once what they thought about Jesus making all that wine. "Oh" they explained, "it wasn't really wine. It was unfermented grape juice." That satisfied me until I began to think about and realized that the idea of my Dad and his brothers, for instance, sitting around for days, all day long, playing penny-ante, and sipping Welch's Grape Juice was a lot more implausible than Jesus doing what the Bible said he did.

I love what Wendell Berry has to say:

"Whoever really has considered the lilies of the field or the birds of the air and pondered the improbability of their existence, will hardly balk at the turning of water into wine which was, after all, a very small miracle. We forget the greater and still continuing miracle by which water (with soil and sunlight) is turned into grapes."

That's a good comment but it does exactly what John doesn't want us to do - namely focus on the miracle. It's a sign, John says - and virtually <u>invites</u> us to ask - "a sign of what?"

A sign surely of abundance, extravagance. John wants us to know that Jesus is the Son of God, the Word made flesh, that when we look at him and watch what he does we are seeing something of the reality of God. And apparently the first thing John wants us to know is that God, the Ground of all Being, is like that - extravagant, abundant. John wants us to open our eyes and see the extravagant abundance of things all around us, of beauty, of the world's fertility, of the goodness of creation, flowers and stars and moon, and sparkling expanses of snow, of newborn babies, of human compassion and caring, of human love.

And surely it is a sign that in order to get God's abundance to where it is desperately needed, Haiti, for instance, it requires faithful servants, obedient people who will fill the jars with water, extend the help, the bandages, and medicine, and blankets and food and two by fours and concrete - people who give out of their abundance so that abundance can meet human need - which is what God intends. It is surely a sign of that.

And no, not all Christians think the earthquake was an act of God, punishing Haitians for making a pact with the devil. And no, not all

Christians believe Haiti is cursed by God - in fact, nobody I know believes that and shouldn't. God's heart is broken and God's love is there in the generous gifts and work of volunteers.

And it surely is a sign that God says "yes" to human joy: that God has created us for reunions and celebrations and laughter. Why would this Son of God, this Word of God made flesh, not begin his work in the Temple, or the Synagogue with a solemn sermon, but at a party, turning water into wine, if it was not a sign of a God who wants us to enjoy our lives, to live fully, to love the gift of life itself?

I've been keeping a story for years that I don't believe ever found its way into a sermon before. One time the officers of this congregation were attending an overnight leadership retreat at the Roman Catholic Seminary and Retreat Center at Mundelein. At the end of the day, there was a reception in the spacious, beautifully appointed lounge. At our end of the room there was a table with snacks and soft drinks and fruit juices. At the other end of the room was a group of Catholic priests with their collars off and Catholic lay people - also at a retreat, also enjoying a reception in the same spacious lounge. At their end of the room was a table with snacks and beverages, soft drinks, fruit juices, beer and wine. Presbyterians were looking at it with ecclesiastical envy. Among the Catholics was their archbishop, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, with his collar off and in shirtsleeves. He was a friend of this church, preached here twice, spoke to our officers, told me he stopped in to pray as he walked down Michigan Avenue to the Diocesan Office. He saw us - looking longingly - motioned to me - "Come join us" he said. And we did. A spontaneous, unplanned ecumenical celebration, a kind of family reunion, a promise of what could be and ought to be and sometimes actually is and what God intends for the human family.

People . . . eating and drinking together, loving the gift of life, loving being together. Jesus was there, I believe, silly as it might sound. Jesus was there just as he was at a wedding in Cana.

In fact Jesus is there at our most human occasions: weddings and funerals and family reunions and meals with our children and grandchildren, meals with dear friends, church meals and party meals and banquet meals and quiet candlelight meals alone or with our beloved.

Jesus is there when the gift of life is gratefully celebrated, when bread is eaten and wine shared just as surely as he was there at a wedding in Cana of Galilee and turned water into wine - the first of his signs.

Amen